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NEWS

# Prison bible seminary offers hope, education

## Danville program prepares prisoners for ministry

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Prisoners Norman Gonzalez, 51, left, and Juan Meneses, 35, attend seminary class in August inside Danville Correctional Center. Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary has 38 inmate students. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

DANVILLE, Ill. — — Before the sun rose too high above the guard tower one recent morning, prisoner Juan Meneses finished his daily gardening routine, raced across campus and bounded into theology class 15 minutes late.

Meneses, 35, didn't have time to take his seat before the professor ordered him to the blackboard. Still out of breath, he peeled off his orange "Grounds Crew" T-shirt to reveal prison blues, picked up a piece of chalk and scrawled the Greek letters epsilon, rho, chi, omicron, mu, alpha, and iota — perfect Greek for "I come."

Here in this classroom, surrounded by chain-link fences, barbed wire and prison guards, the convicted murderer once known as "Sinister" by his fellow Latin Kings says he is trying to escape the name and live a more virtuous life.

He is one of 38 inmates at Danville Correctional Center taking classes such as Greek and the New Testament at the first seminary inside an Illinois state penitentiary.

Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary serves Illinois inmates seeking to become pastors, preachers or theologians when they're released. Since no corrections funds have been set aside to provide college courses for the state's prison population, the four-year, privately funded program is the only route inmates have to earn a bachelor's degree.

"It gets inmates out of their cells and involved in something that keeps their mind moving toward bettering themselves," said Victor Calloway, the assistant warden of programs at Danville. "They take ownership in the mistakes they've made. I want to make sure when these guys leave here they leave with enough information in their heads so they don't come back. Then time served here will be better."

Danville has become a destination for convicted murderers, arsonists and drug dealers who seek education, redemption, and a potential career path. Donors and clergy who support the program believe seminarians also will experience a moral transformation that will rub off on other inmates and family members, potentially altering the course of future generations.

"I have men who prior to their involvement in seminary were the kind of men you didn't want to mess with — a lot of anger problems," said the Rev. Nathan Brummel, a Northwest Indiana Protestant Reformed pastor who is the program's only full-time professor. "Their self-esteem has grown in astonishing ways. Their joy has grown. Now I'm seeing some of those men have a dramatic change-around. They're peacemakers."

The concept of religious formation in modern-day prisons has been around since the end of the 18th century, when Christian reformers created penitentiaries where criminals could reflect on their sins.

Through the 19th and 20th centuries, corrections programs have also fostered rehabilitation. But the cost of rehabilitation isn't always politically palatable. In 2001 former Gov. George Ryan decided to cut $11 million from the state's budget by eliminating a two-decades-old higher education and vocational education program for prisoners. The program had been offered through 12 colleges statewide, including Chicago's Roosevelt University.

John Maki, executive director of the John Howard Association, an Illinois prison watchdog group, said religious organizations have been more aggressive about stepping in to fill the void, not only in Illinois but nationwide. However, it's hard to know if the religious component makes a difference, he said, since programming of any kind reduces recidivism.

Of the $1.3 billion spent on corrections in Illinois, 2 percent goes toward programming for nearly 49,000 inmates and 30,000 parolees.

"The best correctional folk will tell you that programming is essential to security," Maki said. "You can't do programming without security, but programming solidifies and strengthens security. It makes people hopeful."

The program at Danville is modeled after the renowned Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, which in 1995 formed a partnership with New Orleans Baptist Seminary. Hundreds of inmates have been trained to minister to that prison's population, many of whom serve life sentences.

But the seminary inside Danville, a medium security prison just a few miles from the Indiana state line, prepares prisoners to one day serve churches outside its walls. For two decades, the Rev. Manny Mill, director of Wheaton's Koinonia House National Ministries, dispatched volunteers to meet men coming out of the prison's gates.

To reach inmates earlier, Mill set out to emulate the Angola model in the Midwest. When established seminaries balked at the idea, he found a group of Indiana men to start a school of their own. The prison seminary opened last year.

"It's a risky proposition," said Mill, who served 21 months in a federal prison in the mid-1980s for transporting forged checks. "But it's the right thing to do. The millions of people behind bars in the country, they are our neighbors. If we don't do something about educating them in a better way, that's going to cost us more tax dollars and make more victims."

The Rev. Christopher Easton, Danville's chaplain, said many inmates recognize the seminary is a way out or at least a way to persevere while they're locked up for years.

"I believe God is seeking to reveal himself to all of us," said Easton, a pastor ordained by the Church of the Nazarene. "There continues to be light in dark places. That's why I'm here. These inmates are also lights in very dark places. They're (often) the only Christians in their entire family or in their wing."

Calloway said many of the men who transfer to Danville from other state lockups inquire about enrolling in the program when they arrive. In fact, a number of men in other facilities have applied, Brummel said. But they can't transfer to Danville for the explicit purpose of attending the seminary.

Admission requires recommendations from a prison chaplain, a GED or high school degree and an application in which the candidate describes his spiritual journey. It also requires a record of good behavior behind bars.

The program offers three bachelor's degrees: divinity, theological studies and Christian studies. The divinity program, which prepares men for ministry, is closed to sex offenders. Prison officials won't permit ordination, to keep gang leaders from abusing the rite to exercise power over inmates.

After receiving an associate's degree, Meneses hopes to pursue a bachelor's of divinity and become a pastor after completing a 30-year murder sentence — as early as 2024.

Court records say on Nov. 7, 1994, someone smashed the windshield of Meneses' blue Cadillac Seville. He pulled a 9 mm handgun from beneath his bed, grabbed two friends and headed to a nearby alley behind West 59th Street frequented by rival gang members, according to records. Police say he crossed paths with three other teenagers, flashed their gang sign, then waited until their backs were turned to open fire. Two of the teens escaped. But 17-year-old Hiram Martinez was killed.

"I hate that it happened. It was a dark period in my life," Meneses said. "I got involved in gangs and that was pretty much my downfall and why I'm here. I made a mistake." According to court records, the immigrant parents of Hiram Martinez returned to Mexico to bury their son and never returned to the U.S.

As Meneses awaited trial in Cook County Jail, his mother, Esmeralda Salinas, camped outside. With her eyes fixed on the window of his jail cell, she prayed, sang hymns and implored evangelists to go inside the jail and talk some sense into her son.

His mother's devotion and faith, Meneses said, reminded him of the way his parents had raised him. He realized how much he had hurt her and other people and became convinced that God put him on this Earth, and perhaps in prison, for a greater purpose. When the seminary program opened, Meneses was one of the first to apply. He also works in the prison's greenhouse and landscaping program.

"When I germinate a seed I learn a lot from it," he said. "I get to cultivate the soil. I begin to see how God is working in my life. I'm able to be at peace … throughout my stay here it's made me more introspective about my life and the influences around me. I'm not going to get used to this place."

Mill insists that the seminary education shapes more than the prisoners' minds. It changes their hearts and instills a compassion sadly lacking from today's churches.

"The church in America is confused, perplexed, feeble and weak," Mill said. "We are in desperate need of a true revival. I believe that the next revival is going to happen inside those walls and that revival is beginning to brew."

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